

Strengthening Neighborhood Business Districts

Neighborhood Business District Strategy Draft Background Report

City of Seattle
Department of Planning and Development

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This is a draft report, and will be revised based on additional information and public comments.

If you have any questions about this report, or its contents, or if you have suggestions for improvement, please contact:

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Executive Summary

At various times over the years, community people, developers, architects and business organizations have expressed concern with different parts of the Commercial Land Use Code, noting that it is sometimes easier to build a bad project than a good project. Following recommendations from the Mayor's Economic Opportunity Task Force in mid-2002, Mayor Greg Nickels directed the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) to work with citizens to review commercial code requirements and recommend improvements to the City's land use regulations as they apply to neighborhood business districts.

Development regulations that apply in neighborhood business districts were originally adopted in 1986. Since then, the Comprehensive Plan and Neighborhood Plans have been adopted, placing new focus on the importance of neighborhood business districts as the core of neighborhoods intended to accommodate the City's future growth. In addition, repeated amendments to the Land Use Code have made it more complex and difficult to use.

This report provides a foundation for the changes being considered to bring the City's land use regulations more in line with its goals. Its primary purpose is to explore the development that is occurring in Seattle's business districts, and to review the City's current regulations for commercial areas. It seeks to identify what is working with the regulations and what's not, where the City's goals for commercial areas are being met, and where the regulations are falling short.

Overall many things work:

- The City's regulations to ensure compatibility between commercial areas and adjacent residential areas appear to be appropriate.
- Design review allows opportunities for neighborhood-appropriate design solutions and for site-specific design solutions that enhance neighborhood quality.
- Height limits, and the general bulk and scale of buildings in commercial areas are generally appropriate to their environments.

Other things don't work as well:

- The regulations can be overly complicated, detailed and repetitive.
- The regulations can be too rigid, hindering, rather than fostering, good development.
- The regulations preclude uses, such as ground level housing, that could provide appropriate development on sites less suited for commercial development.
- The regulations can sometimes discourage vacant spaces from being reoccupied.
- The amount of parking required for new construction no longer matches measured demand for parking and don't support goals for pedestrian and transit-oriented environments.
- The regulations still allow features of buildings that can create unsafe or unattractive pedestrian environments including blank façades, surface parking along the street front or at the corner and multiple or very large curb cuts across sidewalks.

Finally, changes over the last twenty years provide new opportunities:

- The Comprehensive Plan and neighborhood plans provide a clearer direction about the types of neighborhoods citizens want to create.

- Experience with development under the current Land Use Code provides insights into improvements that can be made.
- The success of the design review program has shown that flexibility can improve design and create better projects.

The information in this report will be used to develop a new land use code that is simpler to use and that provides appropriate flexibility to encourage the type of development the City and neighborhoods want.

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